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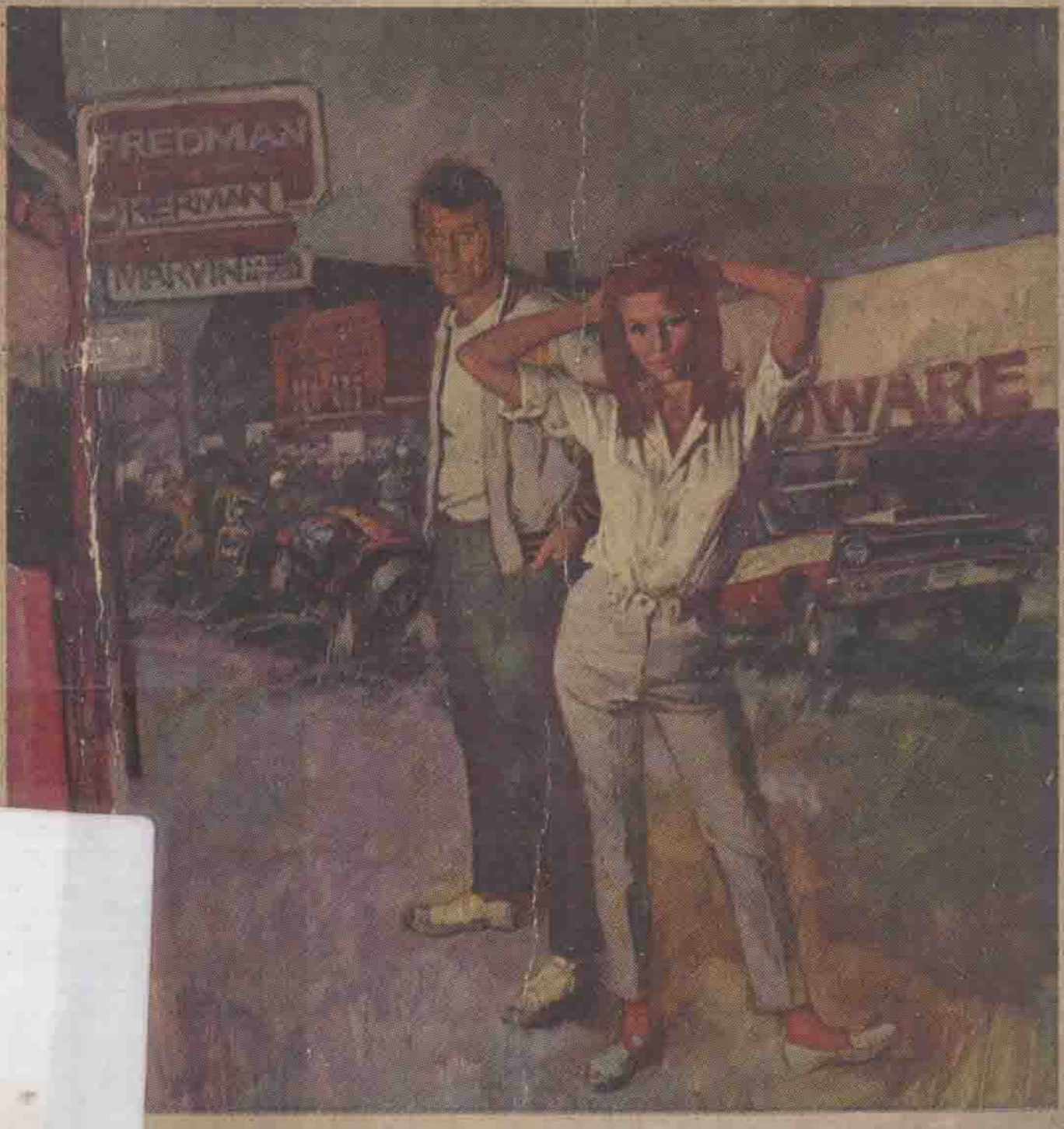
# NEVIL SHUTE

## BEYOND THE BLACK STUMP

A NOVEL OF ROMANCE AND ADVENTURE ON TWO FRONTIERS BY THE AUTHOR OF "ON THE BEACH"



Mollie Regan, fiery, uninhibited daughter of an Australian sheep rancher, knew little of the outside world. To her, the sophisticated cities where people lived in penthouses and drove expensive cars were "beyond the black stump" —a distant Never Never Land of extravagant dreams.

Then Stanton Laird arrived with his American oil prospecting crew. Handsome and worldly, Stan Laird was the fascinating stranger who captured her heart. But Mollie's canny Scots mother didn't believe in being hasty.

And so—unmarried—Mollie traveled with Stan Laird to America, to face the excitement of a new frontier of wealth and power . . . and a love that challenged all her pioneer heritage.

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# BEYOND THE BLACK STUMP

A NOVEL BY

*NEVIL SHUTE*

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My mother used to say to me,
"When you grow up, my son,
I hope you're a bum like your father was
'Cos a good man ain't no fun!"

Stonecutters cut it on stone,
Woodpeckers peck it on wood,
There's nothing so bad for a woman as
A man who thinks he's good.

*Carousel.*

Oscar Hammerstein II.

# One

A NUMBER OF SUBSTANCES that are trapped in the earth's crust will influence a Geiger counter sufficiently to set it clicking, and one of the feeblest of these influences is oil imprisoned in a salt dome or an anticline. Stanton Laird sat in an office of the Topeka Exploration Company, Inc., on the eighteenth floor of the Topex Building in Cedar Street in downtown New York City, and explained his work again to Mr. Sam Johnson. He believed that the work he had done upon his own initiative in analyzing the radioactive indications at the bottom of the pilot drillings at Abu Quaiyah had shortened the seismic observation programme by some weeks and had brought the No. 3 well to production so much sooner, and this was the first bore on that site to produce oil in commercial quantities. He had explained this previously to Mr. Johnson in a fairly lengthy report that he had typed with sweating, gritty hands in the hut beside the oil rig where he had lived with the drilling crew, and he had known as he typed that Mr. Johnson would either be too busy to read it at all or, at best, he would skim it through and merely study the conclusions at the end. In fact, he had done the latter, and he had forgotten all the detail. Only a vague impression on his mind remained, that Stanton Laird was a good youngster who didn't sit around complaining of the heat but got on with his job.

Mr. Johnson didn't say much while the young man talked, for the simple reason that he couldn't trust himself. Like all oil executives he had a general knowledge of petrology, but he had never himself been a geologist. He had come into the oil industry forty years before as an organic chemist, but he had been an executive of Topex now for many years and

his organic chemistry was thirty years out of date, and half forgotten. In dealing with the young technicians who worked under his control he had developed a technique of making them do the talking while he sat back and listened, encouraging them on with phrases such as, "Surely," or "That sounds reasonable to me," or "Dr. Streeter was working on this last fall. I'd like you to have a talk with him." In this way he maintained the fiction that he understood what Stanton Laird was talking about, while his acute subconscious mind summed the young man up and filed the essential data that would determine his advancement in the Topex organization. Long years of practice had made him clever with these phrases so that Stanton Laird believed that his painstaking techniques had made a good impression on his boss. In that he was correct, but not quite in the way he thought. His techniques meant little to Mr. Johnson because he didn't fully understand them, but his approach to the job and his industry meant quite a lot.

Presently the older man glanced at the clock, which showed ten minutes past noon, and steered the conversation to a close. "I guess we'll go and get some lunch," he said. "Which hotel are you staying at?"

"I checked my bags," the young man said. "I've got a friend has an apartment in Peter Cooper Village. I'll call him later on, see if he's got a bed."

"Didn't you get in yesterday?"

Stanton shook his head. "We got a twenty hours' delay at Lisbon. They had to change a motor on the plane."

Mr. Johnson glanced again at his technician. He had always been a pale young man, with very short mousy hair and little colour in his face. Three years in Arabia had bronzed him to a deep yellow rather than a brown; he seemed more adult and self-reliant than when he had last sat in that office, but he did not look very well. Perhaps that was fatigue.

"What time did you get in?"

"I'd say we landed around eight o'clock," the young man replied. "I took a shower at the airport, and came on in to town."

"Get any sleep on the way over?"

"Not very much."

Mr. Johnson pressed a bell on the side of his desk, and

when the girl came in, sleek and young and well groomed, he said, "Sharon, call the club and tell them I'll be bringing a guest in for lunch. Table for two. I'll be right over." The young man's eyes flickered quickly over the stenographer, a motion which did not escape the notice of his boss. Three years in Arabia was tough on a young man.

When the girl had gone out, Mr. Johnson said, "Have any trouble with your health?"

"Not a thing. You don't have to, if you stick by the rules. I'm glad to be out of it before the real hot weather, though."

His boss nodded. "Three summers is enough in Arabia, out in the field." The sun of mid-July streamed in through the slats of the Venetian blind. "I suppose you wouldn't call this a hot day."

The young man smiled. "Kind of humid, after the dry heat. I wouldn't want to work here through the summer."

"We all come to it as we get on in life," said Mr. Johnson. "That's unless we fail to make it, and go run a gas station. There's worse things to do than that, too. That's what I think sometimes, commuting from Norwalk through August, with the temperature 'way up in the nineties." He heaved his massive body up from the desk. "Let's go and get some lunch. How much leave have you got coming? Ten weeks?"

"Nine," said Stanton. "I took a week in Cairo last year."

"That time you flew up to meet P.K. about the core analysis?"

"That's right."

"Maybe we'll give you that. Where are you going for it? Out West?"

Stanton nodded. "I'll go home and stay with my folks, for a while, anyway. I guess I'll be around there most of the time."

They left the office and walked to the elevator. "Oregon, isn't it?" said the older man. " 'Way in from Portland somewhere?"

"That's right," said the geologist. "Place called Hazel, in the back of the state. That's where I come from."

As they descended in the elevator the older man said vaguely, "I knew a man one time went fishing in the Hazel River, runs into the Snake. Would that be the same?"

"That's right," said Stanton. "Hazel's on the Hazel River,

in the northeast corner of the state. There's good fishing in the river—trout."

"Is Hazel a big place?"

The young man shook his head. "About ten thousand at the last count, I think."

At the entrance to the Topex Building and in the street the crowds thronged around them, making conversation impossible; they walked in silence for a couple of blocks and went into another building and up in another elevator. They walked out into the air-conditioned coolness of the club and checked their hats. They went to the washroom and then Mr. Johnson led his guest into the bar. "What's it to be?"

"Orange juice," said the young man.

Mr. Johnson ordered it, with rye on the rocks for himself. "Still sticking to your principles?"

"I guess so," said the geologist. "It's mighty easy to stick to some principles." He laughed. "I just don't like it."

In fact, he had an aversion to alcoholic beverages that was almost pathological. He felt about alcohol as other people might feel about cocaine, that it was most dangerous stuff to take even in the smallest quantities. It was habit forming. If you took one drink you would want another, and another, and another; with each essay the craving would increase till it became overpowering. The end, inevitably, was that you would become an alcoholic, unable to hold down a job, unable to walk down the street without falling flat on your face, fit only for Skid Row. If you were very fortunate, you might be rehabilitated by Alcoholics Anonymous, but throughout your life thereafter you would be wrestling with the ever-present temptation. In many ways cocaine was less dangerous, because it was less readily obtainable.

These feelings were connected, rather strangely, with his first driving licence; he had sowed his wild oats younger than most men. His father, Stanton Laird, was a Presbyterian of remote Scots descent; he had married early and had had four children, two daughters, Stanton Junior, and Dwight. Both daughters were now married, and Dwight was serving with the U.S. Army on the Rhine. In his youth the father had founded the Hazel Cold Storage Corporation, and he had worked it up into a sizable concern by 1938. With the coming of war to the world he had guessed shrewdly that cattle

might prove more profitable than cold storage, and this change in his views corresponded with a restless wish to change his way of life. He had sold the cold storage business and had bought three ranches in the district, and he had profited over the war years from the demand for beef for the armies. As peace approached he looked ahead to the peacetime demand for automobiles, and in 1944 he bought a gas station in Hazel with a vacant lot beside it and two more behind. In 1945 he sold his ranches and in 1946 he built a showroom and extensive modern workshops behind his gas station, with the result that in 1949 he succeeded in wresting the Ford franchise from the aging local dealer. Since then he had prospered more than ever.

The change from cold storage to ranching had come when Junior was fourteen years old and leaving grade school for Hazel High. The change meant that the family removed from the house in Franklin Avenue, which was now too small for them anyway, and went to live about fifteen miles from Hazel on a ranch. In a district where boarding schools were virtually unknown this would have made difficulties in the education of the children but for a thoughtful provision of the State of Oregon, which decreed that in such circumstances a child could get a driving licence, theoretically limited to the route between his home and school. Accordingly Stanton Junior got his first motorcar driving licence at the age of fourteen when he entered Hazel High School, driving Dwight to grade school every day in an old Chevrolet and going on himself to high school. With the driving licence and the car he became free from all parental or any other control.

Like most reputable citizens of Hazel, Stanton Laird never drank in his home town. At cold storage conventions in Portland or Seattle he would drink whiskey for business conviviality in a naïve ignorance of when to stop, so that he got sick and had a hangover next morning, ailments which he regarded as a necessary part of business life like a sagging abdomen due to sitting at a desk all day, and which had influenced his restless change to ranching. His home was happy and well ordered but no tobacco and no alcohol ever entered it, so that it was only natural for Junior, on attaining to the freedom of his own car at the age of fourteen, to start experi-

menting with both. Since Hazel High School was, of course, co-educational, his experimenting wasn't limited to whiskey and cigarettes.

It is a deep conviction of all right-thinking Americans that a boy shows independence, manliness, and self-respect by working his way through college, and a good preparation for this way of life is to encourage him to earn his pocket money while he is in high school. While the Lairds had lived in Hazel they had encouraged Junior to earn by delivering newspapers around the district where they lived. With the coming of war to the world the demand for such services increased, and soon after they moved to the ranch he took on the delivery of Donald Duck bread in the Chev as well as the newspapers, wearing a peaked cap embellished with the emblem of the order, rampant. This new assignment took a good deal longer and made his hours away from home irregular; at the same time it provided him with a considerable income, the extent of which was unknown to his parents, which he could spend on cigarettes, rye whiskey, and girls.

By the time he was sixteen he was leading a thoroughly dissipated life and was giving his parents a good deal of anxiety, though they had no idea of the full scope of his misdoings. There was little left for him to experiment with in the spheres of tobacco, alcohol, or girls, but marijuana cigarettes had just been placed before the youth of Hazel by a Mexican-Negro half-breed who worked in a liquor store. Few of the boys or girls at the high school really enjoyed them, being healthy young people raised in the clean conditions of a small town in the country, but the cigarettes were obviously vicious and so fit subjects for experiment by broad-minded adolescents learning about Life.

The end of it all came when Stanton Junior was in the last term of his junior year. He had a friend called Chuck Sheraton who came to school in an old Plymouth tourer, a merry and inconsequent young man whose one ambition was to fly airplanes. Being friends, they made common property of many of their belongings, including their girls. One evening in the early summer they were playing a complicated game based on "touch last" in their two cars around the streets of suburban Hazel, Diana Fawsitt driving with Chuck and Ruth Eberhart, a notable cheerleader at the football

game for Hazel High, with Stanton. It was a good game, though rough upon the fenders, but that evening they carried it a bit too far. Stanton, coming down Fourth Street and crossing Roosevelt Avenue at seventy miles an hour, hit the Plymouth broadside on and hurled it on its side onto the sidewalk. Diana was thrown out and killed almost instantaneously. Chuck got concussion and a fractured shoulder, but made a good recovery. Ruth got scars upon her face and arms that would last her lifetime as she went through the windshield, and Stanton got three fractured ribs upon the steering wheel. An empty bottle of whiskey was found in the Chev, the doctor pronounced both boys and Ruth to be under the influence of liquor, the post-mortem revealed Diana to have been pregnant, and a further research revealed that Ruth was pregnant, too. All the participants were sixteen years of age.

This happened a few months after Pearl Harbor, when the citizens of the United States, including even Hazel, had more important things to think about than the misdeeds of their teen-agers. Moreover, it was less than eighty years since Hazel had been established as a town, and only about fifty since the trails leading to the east had been made safe from the marauding bands of Indians. In such a place the legislature acts more directly and with fewer inhibitions than in districts with a longer record as communities. Diana Fawsitt was dead and nothing would bring her back to life, and though these boys had killed her it was difficult to argue that she was entirely blameless in the matter: all four of them were culpable in some degree. It seemed profitless to Judge Hadley to start anyone upon a road that might end at the penitentiary; he dealt with the case summarily in ten minutes when the boys came out of hospital and sentenced Chuck and Stanton to a year in the reform school, suspending the sentence indefinitely subject to satisfactory reports from the police. It only remained for the parents to clean up the mess.

When the Eberharts pressed Ruth to declare the father of her child she took two days to think about it in the hospital, and finally decided that Chuck Sheraton was more fun than Stanton. Accordingly when they came out of hospital Ruth and Chuck were married, rather quietly in the circumstances, the bridegroom being still in high school

though Ruth's education was considered to be finished. Stanton was left to remodel his life alone, guided by the practical good sense of a father who was ruefully conscious of incidents in his own youth that would not bear a close examination, and who was inclined to blame himself for not looking after his son better.

The weeks that followed were not happy ones for Stanton. Because he was in hospital with broken ribs and possible internal injuries nobody cared to rub it in that he had killed Diana Fawsitt, but he suffered a good deal from frustration in his first love. Ruth had been his girl, not Chuck's, and if she was pregnant he had a good idea which of them was probably responsible. That she had thrown him over for Chuck was a bitter blow to him, a blow which struck far deeper than the general disgrace. It was intensified when he was able to meet Chuck in the Piggy-Wiggy Café and found, as they discussed their position over a milk shake, that although Chuck liked Ruth well enough he didn't particularly want to marry her or anybody else at the age of sixteen. They were in the grip of forces more powerful than they were themselves, however. Neither of them was old enough to stand up and flout the opinion of the whole community in their hour of disgrace. Chuck was not prepared to stand up to the citizens of Hazel and declare he wasn't going to marry Ruth when she claimed him as the father of her child, which he might well have been, and Stanton was not prepared to stand up in the face of all his other sins and claim paternity from Chuck. A succession of milk shakes did nothing to resolve their problems but left them better friends than ever, united in the disapproval of all Hazel. From their meeting at the Piggy-Wiggy Café Chuck went on to matrimony with Ruth and Stanton turned to work for an anodyne, his grief for Ruth tempered by a secret relief that it had proved impossible for him to get married at sixteen.

He worked very hard in his last year at high school, abandoning his former ways of life. He had a good brain and a good background, with sensible and sympathetic parents to encourage him. It was his intention to go on to the University of Oregon at Eugene but he put in as a long shot for admission to Leland Stanford and, somewhat to his own surprise, he got in. He stayed there for four years, a sober-